

What is claimed is:

1. A vending machine for use with a remote service center which includes a humanly-operated control terminal which communicates with said vending machine to approve or deny vending certain transactions with a buyer, said vending machine comprising:
 - a) a video capture device for capturing an image of the buyer;
 - b) an identification document reader for capturing an image of an identification document of the buyer;
 - c) a communication link coupled to said video capture device and said identification document reader which transmits said image of the buyer and said image of the identification document to the humanly-operated control terminal; and
 - d) a user interface which gives the appearance to the buyer that said vending machine autonomously approves or denies the vending transactions.
2. A vending machine according to claim 1, wherein:

said user interface includes a video display.
3. A vending machine according to claim 2, wherein:

said user interface includes an animated character displayed on said video display.

4. A vending machine according to claim 3, wherein:
said animated character apparently autonomously interacts with the user.
5. A vending machine according to claim 1, wherein:
said user interface includes an audio reproducer.
6. A vending machine according to claim 5, wherein:
said user interface includes synthetic speech reproduced via said audio reproducer.
7. A vending machine according to claim 1, wherein:
some vending machine transactions are controlled by the humanly operated control terminal and some other vending machine transactions are completed without input from the humanly operated control terminal.
8. A vending machine according to claim 1, further comprising:
e) age-restricted items in said vending machine.
9. A vending machine according to claim 8, wherein:
said vending machine is adapted to vend an age-restricted item only after without receiving input from a remotely located human over a communications link.

10. A vending machine according to claim 1, further comprising:

e) means for conducting a sobriety test.

11. A vending machine according to claim 1, further comprising:

e) a processing system adapted to at least one of,

i) provide an indication of the validity of the identification document, and

ii) provide an indication of the likelihood that the buyer is a person whose image is located on the identification document.

12. A system for vending goods which require verifying the age and identity of a buyer of the goods, said system comprising:

a) a remotely-located service center which includes a humanly operated control terminal; and

b) a vending machine, including

i) a video capture device for capturing an image of a buyer,

ii) an identification document reader for capturing an image of an identification document of the buyer,

iii) a communication link coupled to said video capture device and said identification document reader for transmitting said image of the buyer and said image of the identification document to said humanly operated control terminal, and

iv) a user interface which gives the appearance to the buyer that the vending machine processing a vending transaction autonomously.

13. A system according to claim 12, wherein:
said user interface includes a video display.
14. A system according to claim 13, wherein:
said user interface includes a computer generated character displayed on said video display.
15. A system according to claim 12, wherein:
said user interface includes an audio reproducer.
16. A system according to claim 15, wherein:
said user interface includes synthetic speech reproduced via said audio reproducer.
17. A system according to claim 12, wherein:
some vending machine transactions are controlled by the humanly operated control terminal and some other vending machine transactions are completed autonomously.
18. A system according to claim 12, further comprising:
a database in which information related to the identification document and an item vended is recorded.

19. A system according to claim 12, further comprising:

- c) a processing system adapted to at least one of,
 - i) provide an indication of the validity of the identification document, and
 - ii) provide an indication of the likelihood that the buyer is a person whose image is located on the identification document.

20. A method of vending age-restricted products from a vending machine, comprising:

- a) providing a vending machine which appears to a potential purchaser to function autonomously, the vending machine provided with age-restricted product;
- b) at the vending machine taking an image of a potential purchaser of an age-restricted product;
- c) at the vending machine taking an image of a photoidentification of the potential purchaser;
- d) transmitting the images to a remotely located human;
- e) determining by the human the validity of the photoidentification;
- f) determining by the human whether the image of the potential purchaser matches a photo image on the photoidentification;
- g) if it is determined that the photoidentification is valid and the image of the potential purchaser matches the photo image, then vending the age-restricted product; and

h) if it is determined that the at least one of (i) the photoidentification is invalid and (ii) the image of the potential purchaser mismatches the photo image, then denying the potential purchaser from purchasing the age-restricted product at the vending machine.

21. A method according to claim 20, further comprising:

i) prior to determining by the human the validity of the photoidentification, providing the human a computer-calculated likelihood that photoidentification is valid; and

j) prior to determining by the human whether the image of the potential purchaser matches a photo image on the photoidentification, providing the human a computer-calculated likelihood that the image of the potential purchaser matches the photo image on the photoidentification.

22. A method according to claim 20, further comprising:

i) recording in a database data relating to the photoidentification and the vended product.

23. A method according to claim 20, further comprising:

i) using the vending machine to perform a sobriety test prior to vending an age-restricted product, the age-restricted product being an alcoholic beverage.

24. A method according to claim 20, further comprising:

i) using an animated character on a video display on the vending machine to interact with the potential purchaser during the transaction.

25. A method according to claim 20, wherein:

the vending machine appears to approve or deny vending transactions autonomously.